

Homemaker

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Dad was always there to help me out. I didn't know which major I wanted in college; he told me to pick Accounting. After I graduated, I didn't know where I wanted to work; he told me which company to apply to. Eventually, Dad figured it was time for me to settle down and move out of my apartment. "Michael works in your building, right? He comes from good people. Marry him."

I had talked with Michael before, so it was easy to walk past him and wink. I made sure to stand next to him if we were in a group, and he and I just happened to eat lunch at the same time most days. He asked me to a movie one night, and I said yes. He picked the movie and the snacks from the concession stand. It was perfect.

Michael and I went on many more dates after that. I never had to strain myself thinking of where I wanted to go because Michael always chose what we would do. After one dress that was so modest Michael told me it looked like a nun would wear it, he came over before our dates to help me pick out my clothes. He told me that if the neckline was three fingers below my collar bone or higher, I should never wear it on a date. He took care of everything. It was wonderful.

Of course, I still had dinner with Dad every Thursday night and told him all about my week. "You need to get that boy to propose," Dad said, swirling his wine. "Just tell him you're pregnant. It'll be true soon enough." He gave me a weird smile. "Now, let me tell you the best thing to order next time you go on a date."

I told him it wasn't a problem, that Michael always ordered for me. I'm not sure Dad liked that, but he didn't say anything.

Soon, I got a drawer in Michael's apartment. I added a few light accents to his dark dwelling: a vase filled with marbles here, a snow globe there. Life was going so well. Then Dad's ended.

He wasn't there to tell me what to do like he had when Mom died. I was dressed all in black, but it felt wrong. Michael held my hand during the visitation and told me what to say to people. He told me he'd pick my dress for the funeral. Michael was there for me, but I started slipping away. I went driving. Farther and farther. I began to know the highways better than my town's streets.

One Saturday, I drove until late at night, and got a hotel room in the middle of nowhere. The tiny bathroom came stocked with tiny shampoo and conditioner bottles and two tiny bars of soap-one for the shower and one for the sink. I wondered how long it would take to use them up.

I slept in the next day. When I opened my eyes, I saw the dingy hotel room and knew there wasn't a reason to get up. I drifted in and out of sleep, ignoring the brief buzzes my phone made for texts. When it continued buzzing, I couldn't help but answer the call.

"Where are you?"

Michael and I were supposed to have lunch. I told him the name of the town.

“What are you doing out there? I didn't tell you to get a hotel room.”

I told him that I didn't know.

“Come home. We can have lunch on Monday instead.” A pause. “I want to be there for you in this difficult time, Jane. Even though you've been different lately, I still love you. Just come home.”

For the first time, I hung up on Michael, and I turned off my phone. I tried to go back to sleep, but I kept thinking. I didn't want to go back. Home wasn't a good place. I kept thinking about this instead of sleeping. “Then I'll just stay here,” I said sleepily. I opened my eyes. Actually, that was perfect. I could start over, make a new life for myself. Dad had been a huge part of my life before, so it would be difficult continuing without him, but it would be easier in a town that had never known him. I smiled and closed my eyes again. Soon, I drifted back to sleep.

When I woke up awhile later, I realized that I'd need a new job. A job meant interviewing, and that meant that I needed to look decent. I stumbled out of bed and into the shower. The bar of soap hardly looked diminished after I was done. I was glad Dad had told me to keep a change of clothes in my car just in case. After I changed, I got in my car and started cruising. There was a gas station with a “Now Hiring” sign, but Dad would have wanted me to work somewhere better.

Guessing that there would be newspapers at a diner, I pulled into the parking lot of one. I sat in the car for a moment. I would have to order my own food, but if I was starting over, I didn't have a choice. I took a deep breath and headed inside. The waitress set down my water and asked, “Do you know what you want to eat?”

“I'll have grilled cheese, please,” I said, with barely a quaver in my voice.

“All right.” She smiled and took my menu.

It was that easy!

I asked the waitress if they had newspapers and she pointed me to their stacks. I grabbed one and took it back to my table. I looked at the job applications page, but none of the jobs were for an accountant. I needed something soon. I tapped my fingers on the table and finished off my fries. Maybe I didn't care if Dad wouldn't want me working at a gas station.

After I was done eating, I had to pay the bill. I walked up to the register and handed over some cash. The waitress punched in some numbers and handed back my change. “Have a nice day,” she told me.

“I will,” I said, smiling. I could do this.

I walked into the gas station with the “Now Hiring” sign and talked to the man behind the counter. He said I was their only applicant and he'd call me in a few days if I got the job. Then he winked and told me I probably would. Michael would have been so proud. Why was I thinking of him? Dad would have been

proud.

On my way back to my place, I stopped at the grocery store and picked up some food. I got pasta, apples, and a cucumber for dinner as well as a box of brownie mix. Dad would always make me brownies when I had done something right. I carried my bags out of the car and up to my room. Then I remembered that I didn't have a stove. I had a mini fridge and a microwave. This would be an adventure in homemaking.

I didn't have a bowl, so I went to the front desk to ask for one. The lady there told me they didn't give them out to guests. I got back in the car and went to the store again. I got a microwavable bowl for my pasta, a knife and cutting board, some measuring cups, a pan for the brownies, and some silverware, plates and bowls. The lady at the cash register asked if I was just moving into town.

"Yes I am," I said with a smile.

"This is a great town," she told me. "You'll have a good home here."

"I think I will," I told her. I went back to my place and unloaded the car again. Then I trooped upstairs with my goods. I put the bowl in the sink and filled it about halfway with water. Then I put it in the microwave. While that was going, I started cutting the cucumber and filching pieces. It wasn't dinnertime yet, but I was hungry after all my exertion today. The microwave went off and I looked at the water. It wasn't quite boiling yet, but I was hungry and it seemed really hot. I poured in some pasta and put more time on the microwave. I cut a few more cucumber slices and put the rest in the fridge for later. Then I cut up an apple. As I was arranging everything nicely on a plate, the beeper went off again and I checked the pasta. The angel hair wasn't stiff anymore, so it was good enough for me.

I grabbed a spare plate and the pasta bowl and took them both over to the sink. I held the plate against the opening of the bowl and left a thin space for water to escape, then I dumped out the water. A few noodles went with it, but I fished them out of the sink and threw them away. I would hate to have to call a plumber so soon after being on my own.

Dad usually warmed up the sauce, but I figured the warm noodles would do that for me. I put some noodles on my plate and started my first dinner on my own. It wasn't too bad. The cucumber and apple were great, although the apple was a bit brown when I got to it. I didn't finish the pasta, so I put the rest on a plate and set an upside-down plate on top of it in the fridge. When I was done, I took my dishes to the sink, but I realized that I didn't have any dish soap. I had already been out today. I decided I'd pick up soap tomorrow.

After I stacked my dishes neatly on the counter, I sat down to watch some TV. I had to be informed about what was happening in the world, after all. By the time I remembered the brownies, I was too tired to make them. Maybe I'd be good again tomorrow.

I turned off the lights and slid under the covers. Unlike when Michael slept over, I could go to sleep when I was tired. Being a homemaker was great.

Someone called me from the gas station the next day and told me I got the job. I was so excited. I asked when I started work and they told me to come in as soon as I could. I showered, but I had to wear the same clothes I wore two days ago. I had only brought one change of clothes with me. After work, I decided to go shopping.

When I got to the gas station, the same guy was working there as when I interviewed. He showed me how to check in so I would get paid for my time. Then he told me about selling cigarettes and alcohol and what all of the buttons on the cash register meant. After he told me not to keep more than \$200 in the cash register, he said he had somewhere to be and left.

I was on the clock at my new job. It was really boring standing there and waiting for anyone to walk in. Still, that was part of being an adult. One lady came in to pay for her gas in cash and she picked up a pack of cigarettes while she was in. Several hours later, a mom came in with two children. "You can each have one candy bar," she told them. Excited, the kids ran to the candy aisle and started looking at their options.

Their mom grabbed an emergency kit for her car and waited for her kids at the counter. She looked at them and back at the emergency kit she'd grabbed. "Billy, Lucy, we've got to go. Pick something soon, or you won't get one." She looked at me. "Kids," she said shrugging and smiling.

I smiled back. "They must be a handful."

"Sometimes." She smiled. Billy and Lucy came charging to the front of the store with their candy bars clenched tightly. "Put them on the counter so she can ring them up," the woman directed. The kids set their treasures down quickly and I scanned them first so they could get them back sooner. The woman paid with a credit card, and the three of them left.

I remembered the box of brownie mix I had waiting for me back home. Maybe I would have a candy bar instead. At the end of my shift, when the next employee came in, I bought dish soap and a candy bar. I ate my treat while I drove to the mall my coworker had given me directions to. As I was driving, my phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Jane? Where are you? Why didn't you come into work today?"

"I did, Michael. I'm working at a gas station now."

"What?"

"I know. Isn't it great? I mean, it's just for now until I get a better job, but I interviewed all by myself."

"You have a better job. I told them you were sick today. Just come back home and everything will be like it was."

I slammed on the brakes for a red light. "Why would I go back? I am home."

Michael was silent for a moment. Since I had done it once, it was easier the second time. I hung up on him again. The light changed and I made the next

turn to get to the mall.

The first store I walked into had so many beautiful clothes. I knew I wouldn't have room for all of them in my closet and dresser, so I tried to be particular. I picked out an armload of clothes to try on, and left five of them hanging on the rack outside the fitting room. It was getting warmer, so I made sure to buy a sundress. I swiped my credit card at the cash register, and carried my bags back to my car. Traffic was light, so I got back to my home quickly. I carried everything upstairs and locked the door behind me. I was in for the night. I had a great time cutting the tags off my purchases and putting them away. I left the closet doors open so I could walk over and admire my clothes. It had been my first shopping trip alone.

As I lounged in bed while watching TV, I couldn't help but think, "I have a great home." I smiled, half-paying attention to the television. An ad came on with a smiling family, and it suddenly hit me. I didn't have a great home. I was still missing something. I needed a baby.

I didn't have work the next day. I resolved to find a baby. I'd take such good care of it. It could sleep in bed with me. I wondered if babies liked pasta. "Silly," I chided myself. "Babies drink milk." I'd buy some tomorrow and get some bottles. I turned off the TV and slid under the covers. I fell asleep thinking about how I'd welcome a baby into my home.

The next day, I realized my first order of business had to be diapers. I had passed a baby store on my way to the mall the other day, so I knew where to go. Babies used a lot of diapers, so I put several packs in my cart. I knew that a man and a woman made babies, but I was still disappointed that none were on sale at the store. "It needs to change its name," I thought, grabbing a package of baby bottles. As I was touring the store, picking up little things I realized I would need for a baby, I found the section for formula. I grabbed a few packages of that and looked at my cart. My baby would need clothes too! I found the correct section, but did not know whether to buy boys' or girls' clothes. I didn't know which one my baby would be. I decided on some cute onesies. They were a bit flowery for a boy, but if I got a boy, I hoped he'd forgive me for it later.

I was surprised at how much everything cost, but I swiped my credit card all the same.

"First time mother?" the cashier asked me with a smile.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm not sure if I'll get a boy or a girl. Do you think these clothes are okay?"

She looked them over. "Yeah. These are pretty androgynous."

"Oh good. I'm picking my baby today and I wanted everything to be ready."

"Are you adopting?"

I thought about it for a moment. "Yes I am."

"How exciting. There are a lot of children who need a good home."

"I've got one." I said, smiling and putting my bags in the cart.

“Good luck!”

“Thanks.” I left the store humming. I was going to adopt. I was such a good person. I’d just look around for an unhappy mother and offer to take her baby. It couldn’t be that hard. First, though, I needed to put away the formula.

I went home and carried all of my bags up the stairs. I slid the formula in the fridge and started taking the packaging off of everything else. I arranged the bottles in a line on top of the desk and laid out the onesies near them. My garbage can was overflowing at this point. If I wanted to be a good mother, I’d have to take out the garbage. I made sure to put a new bag in, then I tied up the full bag and headed down to the dumpster to throw it away. My phone started ringing, so I set down my garbage bag next to the dumpster and looked at it. Michael was calling. I pushed “Ignore” and put my phone back in my pocket. I still heard a noise, though. It was coming from the dumpster. Confused, I looked in and started moving bags of garbage around. Someone had been very unhappy with their baby; they’d left her in the dumpster. She was covered in yuck, but I pulled her out anyway. Babies were supposed to be cute, but she was red in the face from crying so long. Maybe if I gave her a bath first, she’d look cute later. I slung my garbage into the dumpster and headed back up to my home.

She stopped crying when I started walking, but after I stopped moving, she started up again. “Shh. It’s okay,” I told her. “We’re going to get you cleaned up.” I looked in the bathroom, but it was just a shower stall, not a bathtub. I didn’t think you put babies in the shower. “I guess the sink will have to do,” I told her. I ran the water warm and plugged up the sink. I stripped off her diaper and wiped all of the gross stuff off of her that I could. When the sink was pretty full, I put the baby in the water. I set her down to open the bottle of baby shampoo/soap and she slid under the water. I set the bottle down and pulled her up.

“What are you doing?” I asked her. “You can’t swim in here.” Then I remembered that babies can’t sit up at first. This was going to be more difficult than I’d thought. I opened the bottle one-handed, and slathered the shampoo/soap over her. The rest of the stuff from the dumpster came off and turned the water in the sink a dark green. I pulled her out and set her on a towel. She had stopped crying and I made sure she was still breathing. Babies were fragile. I unplugged the sink and pulled out the solid bits of garbage. The baby started crying again, but I had to wash the stuff off my hand before I could touch her. When my hands were clean, I wrapped her in a towel and walked around the room with her. She quieted, but still fussed a bit.

“Oh. You’re hungry.” I opened the fridge and pulled out a bottle of formula. I set her down on my bed and poured some formula into one of the baby bottles. I put the nipple into her open mouth and she stopped crying and started sucking down the formula. Then I realized I needed to put a diaper and clothes on her. I thought about taking the bottle out of her mouth to do this, but I knew she’d start crying again. I would too, if someone took away my food. She held onto the bottle, but she wasn’t strong enough to hold it by herself.

I resorted to sliding the bag with the package of diapers and changing cloth to a well-lit spot with my foot. When she stopped drinking, I set her down and laid out the changing cloth. There was something for diaper rash, so I opened that tube. Then I set her on the changing cloth and read the directions on the tube of cream. I applied it where the tube told me to and put a diaper on her. It was too loose the first time, but I undid it and tightened it a bit. I looked at my work and smiled. Then I grabbed a onesy from where I had laid them out on the desk and put it on her.

She looked up at me and smiled. My heart melted and I knew I had made a good home. Someone knocked on my door. I picked up the baby and walked over. I might not want to answer. My home was not in a good part of town and I had a baby to look after now. I looked through the peephole and saw Michael.

What was he doing here? Maybe he wanted to start over, too. I wasn't sure how I felt about that, but maybe Michael would tell me. I looked at the baby closing her eyes in my arms. Maybe I would figure out my own opinion. Either way, it was rude to leave him standing outside. I opened the door.

"There you are. Now come home with me."

"I am home."

Michael looked at the baby in my arms then past me, into my home. "Can I come in?"

"Sure." I stepped back from the door. I sat on the bed and Michael pulled over the desk chair.

"What the hell are you doing with a baby?" he asked me. "Where did you get it?"

"Her," I said, swaying gently so she wouldn't cry. "I found her. I needed a baby to make this a home, and she needed a mommy."

Michael closed his eyes and put his head in his hands. "First you're working at a gas station, and now you've got a baby?"

"I got all the stuff I need to take care of her. I just fed her."

"Do you have a burping cloth?" he asked me.

"A what?"

"After you feed a baby, you've got to burp it. Sometimes more stuff comes up with the burps."

"Oh. I guess I could use a towel."

"How do you think you can be a mother? You don't know anything about it."

"I'm making a home here, so I have to be a mother. You can help me. The three of us can live here. We can make a home together." I set my baby down on the bed, where she began dozing.

Michael glanced around my home again. "Jane, this isn't a house. You need to come home with me. We can leave the kid at a fire station. She'll get taken care of."

"You want me to leave my baby?" I stood up.

"She's not your baby," Michael told me. "I don't want you taking care of a kid that isn't mine. We'll have some kids of our own, okay? Just not right now."

"When will we have kids, then? When you say it's a good time?"

"Yeah. I would know."

"No, Michael. I'm sick of you telling me what to do."

"You can't keep that baby. She's got to go to a real mother."

"I am a real mother!" I saw Michael reaching for my baby, so I grabbed a lamp and smashed it over his head with all my strength. He looked confused, then he crumpled to the floor. I stared at him for a moment. Then I began to smile. I had a home with a man and a baby. I went down to my car and got my roll of duct tape and some rope. I would have to make sure my man didn't run away, but that wouldn't be too hard. This would be the perfect home.